

# An Occupational Therapist's Roadmap to Hand Therapy

## Signs that a baby has a hand preference:

-  They prefer using one hand and/or dislike using the other.
-  They keep one hand in a fist.
-  Their one hand moves slower and/or looks awkward compared to the other hand.

## What does hand preference mean?

Signs of asymmetrical hand use are not typical in babies younger than 12 months old. The baby may be at risk for a cerebral palsy (CP) diagnosis and could benefit from hand therapy.

## A baby's hand preference



## Options to assess hand preference:

- [Screening Hand Assessment for Infants \(HAI\)](#): for 3.5 to 12 months old
- [HAI](#): for 3 to 12 months old
- [Mini-Assisting Hand Assessment \(AHA\)](#): for 8 to 18 months old
- [AHA](#): for 18 months to 18 years old



## Standardized assessments to diagnose cerebral palsy

- Hammersmith Infant Neurological Evaluation
- General Movements Assessment (<4 months)
- Brain MRI may be requested by physician

**No need to wait for confirmed CP diagnosis to start therapy**

## When a parent comes to you for early hand therapy:

-  Start therapy as soon as possible

If you don't have experience with early hand therapy, consult these resources:

-  [Bloorview](#), [UCalgary](#), and [OT mentors](#)

-  Encourage the family to talk to a doctor about their baby's hand asymmetry.

## How you can help



## What is your role for early hand therapy?



You do not need to follow a specific protocol. The goal is to encourage increased use of the baby's less-preferred hand.



Early hand therapy is done while parents play with their baby.



**Your role is to coach the parent.** Provide consistent support, virtually (phone, email, video call) or in-person.



There aren't special tools, toys, or skills needed.

## Two effective play-based approaches

-  **Constraint induced movement therapy (CIMT)**

A baby's preferred hand is [wrapped](#) ("[constrained](#)") to encourage the use of their helper hand/arm while engaging in one-handed activities like reaching for objects or picking up food.

**Wrapping the preferred hand is not harmful. It may take several tries for the baby to get used to the constraint.**



## Bimanual therapy

A baby practices using both hands together, like clapping. Or, each hand may do a different movement, like holding a container while the other hand takes the lid off.



**Both approaches** can improve how a baby uses their less-preferred hand. You can use one or both. Choose the approach that works for the parent and baby.

## What early hand therapy involves



## How do parents start?



Place the baby in a stable position, like in a baby lounger or highchair.



Sit where your baby can see their parent's face.



Play! [Select activities](#) based on the baby's skill and age to [create a program](#).

**30 minutes everyday** is recommended, but this can be broken up into smaller time chunks. Even a little bit of time can make a difference.

## How can you encourage skill development?



Follow [motor learning principles](#): Repetition, progression, and variety.



Share tips with families for [engaging, challenging, and encouraging their baby](#).

Where can I learn more?

 Instagram: [@therapy4littlehands](#)

 Websites: [UCalgary](#) | [Bloorview](#)



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